The Promise of Deschooling

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Politics, Pedagogy, Culture, Self-design, Community Control.

It is virtually anathema in our culture, but I want to argue here that our society needs far fewer schools, not more. I believe that schools as we have conceived them in the late-20th Century are a parasite on our communities, a burden to our children and are the very essence of a hierarchical, anti-ecological culture. I further contend that dissolving the school monopoly over our kids may well hold the key to reconstructing our communities around local control and participatory democracy. Fortunately, there are a phenomenal number of alternatives to schools and schooling already flourishing in every community across the continent, representing a major threat to centralized institutional control. The abject failure of monopoly, state-controlled, compulsory schooling is evident to anyone who looks. The nightmare of schooling is costing our kids, our families and communities dearly in every way. Schools waste more money than anyone can fully conceive of, demand that our kids spend twelve years of their natural youth in morbidly depressing and oppressive environments and pour the energies of thousands upon thousands of eager teachers into demeaning and foolish classrooms. The sanctity of public schools has become so reified in our bizarre North American public political consciousness that people reflexively mouth support for 'education spending' or 'school dollars' without any comprehension of what they are calling for. The reality that stands as background to the sordid liberal-conservative debate about how much cash to allocate to public schools is a system that systematically nurtures the worst in humanity and simultaneously suppresses individuality and real community.

Deschooling is a call for individuals, families and communities to regain the ability to shape themselves. It is a political, a cultural and a pedagogical argument against schools and schooling, and the impetus to fundamentally reorganize our institutional relationships. For many good reasons I believe schools are the linchpin of the monopoly corporate state power over local communities, and actively resisting their grip holds much of the key to local power. I want to analyze and forward deschooling here in terms of three kinds of arguments: political, cultural and pedagogical, and draw each into a rubric of radical decentralism and direct democracy.

A Political Argument

A political argument in favour of deschooling is a fairly simple one. Schools are huge businesses. They command massive amounts of capital, huge administrative apparatuses, they have enormous workforces and sprawling facilities, "Schooling is the largest single employer in the United States, and the largest grantor of contracts next to the Defense Department". Over the course of a century, schools have developed into monumental undertakings, and the money that pours into them comes directly out tax dollars. Schooling is "a very profitable monopoly, guaranteed its customers by the police power of the state". Schooling is about the triumph of the state over families and communities, and the spectacular entrenchment of bureaucracy at innumerable levels makes reform unthinkable. All across North America the pattern is relentless: tax money is appropriated in ever growing amounts and amassed in Ministries of Education, with colossal infrastructures and blanket mandates to license schools, accredit teachers and manufacture curricula. These Ministries then distribute that money to sanctioned school districts, themselves with huge bureaucracies who transfer money and required curricula to the actual schools. Teachers, also all accredited and sanctioned, are then given a series of groups of children, and are required to pass on a required curriculum in a required time frame. The

effect is a seemingly endless hierarchy, with a downward spiral of tighter and tighter control, so that at the classroom level there is minimal flexibility. Teachers are given strict guidelines about discipline, achievement, pedagogy and time. They are reduced to information conveyers, passing on a prescribed set of knowledges to a prescribed population in a strictly regulated environment. And the real losers, of course, are the kids and their families. First, they are seeing only a sliver of their tax dollar returned to them, and have no political voice in how or where that sliver is spent. As John Gatto (1935-), a past New York City and State Teacher of the Year and now vigourous deschooling advocate shows:

> Out of every dollar allocated to New York schools 51% is removed at the top for system-wide administrative costs. Local school districts remove another 5% for district administrative costs. At the school site there is wide latitude (concerning) what to do with the remaining 44%. but the average school deducts another 12% more for administration and supervision, bringing the total deducted from our dollar to 68 cents. But there are more non-teaching costs in most schools: coordinators of all sorts, guidance counselors, librarians, honorary administrators who are relieved of teaching duties to do favours for listed administrators… under these flexible guidelines the 32 cents remaining after three administrative levies is dropped in most schools to a quarter, two bits. Out of a 7 billion dollar school budget this is a net loss to instruction from all other uses equaling 5 1/2 billion dollars.

This kind of pattern is recognizable in every school district across the continent. There is an incredible amount of money devoted to education, for example, "in Washington State nearly half of every tax dollar is spent on kindergarten through twelfth-grade education.", and precious little of it is ever returned to those it was appropriated for, "New York State, for instance, employs more school administrators than all of the European Economic Community nations combined." There is an amazingly pervasive myth that government schooling is cheaper than private education, and that opposition to schools is thus a necessarily elitist proposal. It is a contention that is plainly absurd, and one that common sense, a priori evidence and statistics prove foolish.

> of the two forms (public and private) … public school is by far the most expensive in direct cost (we'll leave social costs out of it for the moment!), averaging $5500 a year per seat nationally, to a national average for all forms of private education of about $2200.

The scale of school bureaucracy is monstrously wasteful, and as a government sponsored monopoly with guaranteed customers there is no pressure on schools to perform, in fact the opposite is true. Schools are rewarded for failure. When students emerge from schools with minimal skills and degraded personalities, the call inevitably goes up for more school money, more teachers, longer school years, more rigourous regulation. Schools are failing at even their own narrow mandates, and yet the response is to then increase their power and scope, which is the reverse of what is really needed. We need fewer schools and less schooling. The inherent logic of centralized monopoly schooling is faulty, both in terms of economics and pedagogy. Schools have always been conceived of in terms of warehousing and the efficient maintenance of a maximum number of children, and in a very limited way, contemporary schools are moderately effective at that, although hardly cost-effective. The difficulty with school logic is that kids habitually defy regimentation and families continue to demand that their children be given conditions to flourish in. What it means to flourish though, and what each individual family and child needs to grow into themselves is as variable as kids themselves. Every

child is a unique and enigmatic individual with all the nuances and contradictions humanity entails, and each requires a specific set of circumstances and environments to learn, grow and flourish that only the kid and their family can even begin to comprehend. Necessitated by its very structure, compulsory schooling attempts to standardize and regulate all students' patterns of learning, and plainly does not and will not work. This represents the street-level tragedy of schooling, and underlines a political argument for deschooling. The centralized appropriation of school money drains families and local communities of the resources to create locally and individually appropriate learning environments. What is needed is a vast, asystematically organized fabric of innumerable kinds of places for kids to spend their time. A decentralized, deschooled community vision includes homelearners of every stripe, learning centres, traditional schools, religious schools, Montessori, free schools, arts and performing centres, dance troupes, language training, athletic clubs etc., all organized on the basis of local need and interest. The resources should be available in every community to create a swath of local answers, and for each family and kid to develop their own educational and pedagogical approaches. The attempt to drive all children into centralized, compulsory and regimented schooling is an absurd scam and wasteful at every level. It is impossible for healthy children to thrive in such circumstances, and the century-long effort to enforce schooling has been hugely costly. It is a burden our communities should bear no longer.

A Cultural Argument

A cultural argument for deschooling follows naturally and easily from a political analysis. The attempt to entrench compulsory schooling is felt throughout society, not only by children, and the corrosive effects of the school mentality reaches deep. Americanist culture is profoundly mired in what Wendell Berry calls simply 'a bad way of life': "Our environmental problems (are not) at root, political; they are cultural … our country is not being destroyed by bad politics, it is being destroyed by a bad way of life. Bad politics is merely another result." Clearly, the domination centralized, hierarchical and compulsory state schooling exercises over our children represents a major support for a bad way of life. A culture of compulsory schooling is a culture that reifies the centralized control and monitoring of our daily lives. A society that has been obsessively schooled from an early age swiftly becomes a place where self-reliance is abandoned in favour of professional treatments, and the most essential human virtues are transformed into commodities. As Ivan Illich put it in *Deschooling Society*: imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value.

> Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work. Health, learning, dignity, independence, and creative endeavor are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools and other agencies in question… the institutionalization of values leads inevitably to physical pollution, social polarization, and psychological impotence: three dimensions in a process of global degradation and modernized misery.

A schooled society actively undermines the development of self and community reliance, in favour of institutional treatments. A directly democratic agenda has to include an explicit renunciation of the other-controlled mentality of compulsory schooling. There is an important set of distinctions to be

made here, and it is a critical deschooling project to carefully define schooling, education and learning. Popular and professional usage tends to conflate the three cavalierly, and the differences in real and perceived meaning are useful. Schools practise a certain brand of schooling: they are institutions with their own particular ideologies and pedagogical approaches, and they are devoted to schooling, or imparting a certain set of values, beliefs and practises upon their clients. Schooling has found its ultimate (thus far) expression in the current state-run, compulsory child warehousing system we call public schools. But schooling can still take place outside of schools themselves, and clearly that is what many homeschooling families do, they school their children at home. Schooling is about people-shaping, it is about taking a particular set of values, an explicit view of the way things are or ought to be, and training students to be able to repeat that information in specific ways. The success of schooling can be evaluated in very quantifiable and obvious ways. Teaching is the practise of that transfer of information. The teacher is a professional, someone trained in a variety of ways to coerce, cajole, plead, beg, drive, manipulate or encourage their students to receive, accept and repeat the information they are offering. The teaching profession often attempts to view its work as 'sharing', but the practise of teaching and the act of sharing are very different things. One is a service, with one person, very often unrequested, imparting a piece of information onto another, defining the knowledge and evaluating the other's ability to describe that knowledge. Sharing is about offering one's understanding freely, it is allowing another person access to a private understanding. One is professionalized manipulation, the other is friendship and genuine humanity. Further, I want to draw your attention to education. Education is the larger context, the meta-model, the excuse for schooling. The educative stance is an interpretation of what is good and important knowledge to have, a description of what every person ought to know to become a legitimate member of society. Educators describe what people should know, *for their own good.* As Boston writer and unschooler Aaron Falbel writes:

> I believe that John Holt is right in saying that most people use 'education' to refer to some kind of *treatment.* … It is this usage that I am contrasting with learning, … this idea of people needing treatment. … Many people use the words 'learning' and 'education' more or less interchangeably. But a moment's reflection reveals that they are not at all the same… Learning is like breathing. It is a natural human activity: it is part of being alive. … Our ability to learn, like our ability to breathe, does not need to be tampered with. It is utter nonsense, not to mention deeply insulting to say that people need to be taught how to learn or how to think. … Today our social environment is thoroughly polluted by *education* … education is forced, seduced or coerced learning.

This is clearly not a simple semantic discrepancy and begins to mark out important territory. Education is all about the centralization of control, self-directed learning is fundamental to a self- and community reliant culture. The deschooling argument I want to make here presumes that each and every individual is best able to define their own interests, needs and desires. Schools and education assume that children need to be taught what is good, what is important to understand. I refuse to accept this. Kids do not need to be taught. Our children should be supported to become who they are, to develop and grow into the unique, enigmatic, contradictory individuals that we all are, away from the manipulative and debilitating effects of education. The renunciation of education is imperative for the creation of a ecologically sane, decentralized and directly democratic society. As John Holt (1923–85), the Godfather of the unschooling and homelearning movements has written:

> Education, with its supporting system of compulsory and competitive schooling, all its carrots and sticks, its grades, diplomas and credentials, now seems to me perhaps the most authoritarian and dangerous of all the social inventions of mankind. It is the deepest foundation of the modern and worldwide slave state, in which most people feel themselves to be nothing but producers, consumers, spectators and 'fans', driven more and more, in all parts of their lives, by greed, envy and fear. My concern is not to improve 'education' but to do away with it, to end the ugly and antihuman business of people-shaping and let people shape themselves.

Deschooling suggests the renunciation of not only schooling, but education as well, in favour of a culture of self-reliance, self-directed learning, and voluntary, non-coercive learning institutions. A disciplined rejection of schooling and education does not insulate a person from the world, it engages them, demands that they make decisions and participate genuinely in the community, rather than waste time in institutions that have limited logic and meaning only internally. I believe that schooling and education are destructive forces across the board, with their implicit and explicit effects being to further entrench and reinforce hierarchy and centralized domination.

A Pedagogical Argument

At root, any political or cultural arguments for deschooling have to rest on some specific pedagogical beliefs about the nature of learning and living. Years of considering pedagogy and five years of running a learning centre for young children has consistently shown me that kids and adults are perfectly capable of running and directing their own lives, given the opportunity and nurturing circumstances. The idea that there is an absolute body of knowledge that every child should access if they are to grow up healthily is a dangerous and debilitating one. Further, "it cannot be overemphasized that *no body of theory exists to accurately define the way children learn*, or which learning is of the most worth". Every individual is an enigmatic creation of circumstance, personality, environment, desire and much else, and their learning interests, styles and needs are equally unique. It is absolutely true that there is no body of theory explaining how children learn, since it is absurd to speak of 'children' in any unified way, any more than we would speak of women or men as homogenous groups. Individual learning patterns and styles come in infinite varieties, and the only way to fit a vast number of children into a single pedagogical program and a regimented schedule is with a severe authoritarianism. To maintain a modicum of order, schools are reduced to the kind of crude control unschooling advocate and author of *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* Grace Llewellyn describes:

> The most overwhelming reality of school is CONTROL. School controls the way you spend your time (what is life made of if not time?), how you behave, what you read, and to a large extent, what you think. In school you can't control your own life. … What the educators apparently haven't realized yet is that experiential education is a double-edged sword. If you do something to learn it, then what you do, you learn. All the time you are in school, you learn through experience how to live in a dictatorship. In school you shut your notebook when the bell rings. You do not speak unless granted permission. You are guilty until proven innocent, and who will prove you innocent? You are told what to do, think, and say for six hours each day. If your teacher says sit up and pay attention, you had better stiffen your spine and try to get Bobby or Sally or the idea of Spring or the play

> you're writing off your mind. The most constant and thorough thing students in school experience — and learn — is the antithesis of democracy.

This centralized authoritarianism is the core of schooling, and it reduces learning to a crude mechanistic process. Alongside a deep distrust of self-designed learning, schooling teaches children that they are always being observed, monitored and evaluated, a condition French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault (1926–1984) has named as panopticism. In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault described the prison panoptical model as a thin circular building, divided into a vast number of cells, with a guard tower in the middle. The cells have a window on either end, but none on the sides, leaving the inhabitants of each small box effectively backlit for viewing from the tower, but fully isolated from one another. All the prisoners can thus be viewed fully at any time by any one single person in the central tower, "the arrangement of his room, opposite the central tower, imposes upon him an axial visibility; but the divisions of the ring, those separated cells, imply a lateral invisibility." The critical factor in this arrangement is that the prisoners do not ever know if or when they are being watched. They cannot see when the guards are in the tower, they can never know when they are being observed, so they must assume that it is always the case.

> Hence, the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearer.

This is the essence of panopticism. The actual surveillance is not functionally necessary, the subject swiftly assumes responsibility for their own constraints, and the assumption of constant monitoring is internalized and they evolve into both the prisoner and warden.It is hardly a stretch to fit modern schools, hospitals, prisons or psychiatric institutions into this model. One of the cultural residues of mass compulsory schooling is a widespread panoptical imprint. People who have been rigorously schooled reflexively believe they are always being watched, monitored and evaluated. It is a condition many of us, myself certainly included, can recognize easily and identify working virtually constantly in our lives. Schools and schooling lead us to believe that we are always under surveillance, and whether or not it is actually true is insignificant, it is the impulse that the schooled person necessarily accepts, and adjusts their behaviour accordingly. The schooled panoptical mentality extends itself further into parenting and adult-child non-school relationships. At school children are always monitored, and schooled parents believe that they should similarly be constantly monitoring their offspring, in the name of safety. The last decades of this century has seen an exponential growth in concern for children's daily safety, particularly in cities, and most parents I come into contact with want to keep a very close eye on their kids. This is a laudable concern, and one I share, yet I have a deep suspicion of the equation that safety = surveillance. There is a threshold where our concerned eye becomes over-monitoring and disabling, an authoritarian presence shaping our kids' lives.

If we want and expect our kids to grow up to be responsible creatures capable of directing their own lives, we have to give them practise at making decisions. To allow authority to continually rob our kids of basic decisions about where and how to play is to set our kids up for dependence and incompetence on a wide scale. Children who are genuinely safe are those who are able to make thoughtful,

responsible, independent decisions. The panoptical society and schooling severely restricts individual self-reliance, and supports a disabling reliance on authoritarian monitoring. A deschooled antidote to this condition is trust. Parents have to trust their kids to make real decisions about their own lives, as Dan Greenberg, who founded the Sudbury Valley School in 1968 outside of Boston, describes:

> We feel the only way children can become responsible persons is to *be* responsible for their own welfare, for their own education, and for their own destiny. … As it turns out, the daily dangers are challenges to the children, to be met with patient determination, concentration, and most of all, care. People are naturally protective of their own welfare, not self-destructive. The real danger lies in placing a web of restrictions around people. The restrictions become challenges in themselves, and breaking them becomes such a high priority that even personal safety can be ignored. … Every child is free to go wherever they wish, whenever they want. Ours is an open campus. Our fate is to worry.

If we are to truly counter the disabling effect of schools, this is indeed our fate. A genuine democracy, a society of self-reliant people and communities, has to begin by allowing children and adults to shape themselves, to control their own destinies free of authoritarian manipulation.

Some common objections and some short respones

There are many objections to a deschooling agenda, and while many of them are vigourously forwarded by those with very entrenched interests in the maintenance of schools and school funding, some of the critiques are salient. The primary set of reservations centers around access issues, the inference that without public schools, many kids will be without adequate educational opportunities, and the oft-repeated claim that a deschooled society would mean excellent facilities for rich communities and inadequate ones for poor families. These kinds of access arguments all focus around the implied belief that schools have somehow operated as great levelers, institutions that rise above societal inequalities and become places of equal opportunity where anyone can succeed regardless of their background, a claim that is patently false. Schools have always closely mimicked larger cultural and social inequities and rich kids have always had huge advantages in a schooled culture. The scenario of well-funded and prospering schools in rich areas alongside nightmare schools with abysmal resources in poor neighbourhoods is already the reality, as Jonathon Kozol has documented so clearly in *Savage Inequalities.* It is a pernicious myth that schools have ever acted as levelers. Moreover, the argument that school funding, if loosed from State control and returned to local communities would result in wide disparities in quality of opportunity is exactly the kind of paternalizing ethic that is so endemic in centralizing arguments. The assumption is that poor or non-affluent people cannot manage their money appropriately, and that families and communities need government agencies to spend their money for them, less they waste it. This is the paternalism that is at the heart of statism. The second major set of objections revolves around the idea that schools should shepherd and caretake an existing canon of knowledge that it is essential for everyone to comprehend, and without that understanding, kids have little chance to succeed in a society that reifies that canon. This argument is frequently forwarded by cultural conservatives lamenting the decline of Western Civilization and traditional standards and the clear articulations of education and intellectual status that were so once so easily defined. The contention that schools are the only guarantor of certain kinds of success has been convincingly refuted by the homeschooling and alternative education movements in North America

and elsewhere, not to mention the examples of a plethora unschooled figures throughout history. Free school follow-up studies and the examples of families like the Colfaxes, who sent three homeschooled sons to Harvard, continue to demonstrate that success, however defined, is entirely possible beyond the constraints of compulsory schooling, and that there are innumerable paths to any goal. The final set of objections to deschooling I want to address here is argument that schools actually are not *that* bad and that the deschooling agenda somehow over-dramatizes their failings. The reasoning is that so many of us attended traditional schools and emerged alright, and that there are, in fact, good teachers and nice schools out there. These assertions are all undeniably true, but miss the point entirely in a culture where it is an old clich_ that 'all kids hate school' As Bookchin puts it "The assumption that what currently exists must necessarily exist is the acid that corrodes all visionary thinking" (21), and its this kind of debilitating reformist stance that deschooling so plainly refutes.

A conclusion and hopefully, a beginning

I believe that deschooling represents a fundamental piece in the construction of an ecological society. To resist compulsory schooling is to resist the other-control of our lives at levels that dig at the very root of family and community at a daily, visceral level. Real communities can and are being built around an opposition to monopoly schooling all across the continent. The most compelling of these movements are those which are rejecting not only government schools, but the cultural and pedagogical assumptions of schooling and education themselves. It is easily possible to envision a society where schools are transformed into community learning centres that fade into a localist fabric, and are replaced by a vast array of learning facilities and networks, specific training programs, apprenticeships, internships and mentorships, public utilities like libraries, museums and science centres. The simplistic monoculture of compulsory schooling is abandoned in favour of innumerable learning projects, based on innumerable visions of human development, and children and adults alike are able to design, manage and evaluate the pace, style and character of their own lives and learning. The implications of schools reverberate throughout our culture, and it is plainly clear that an ecological society cannot bear the burden that schools place on our kids, families and communities. They are crude constructions for a world that has been exposed as unethical and unsustainable. Deschooling represents a tangible and comprehensive site for a disciplined renunciation of centralized control, and a transformative vision, not only of personal autonomy, but of genuine social freedom.

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